



**Remarks by Vermont Commissioner of Health Dr. Paul Jarris
Vermont Pandemic Flu Summit – January 12, 2006**

I want to welcome and thank everyone for taking time out of your schedules on short notice to be with us today.

Some of you probably wondered if you were sent an invitation to a public health event in error. Let me assure you, there was no mistake...

I particularly appreciate your coming today, and I'm confident that by the end of the day, you will understand the important role you must play in Vermont's response to an influenza pandemic.

We are proud to have the United States Secretary of Health and Human Services Mike Leavitt join us – as well as Assistant Secretary for Health Dr. John AG WUN OH BEE from Health and Human Services – and Dr. Jeff RUN GEE, chief medical officer at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Other distinguished guests joining us today are Vermont Secretary of Human Services Mike Smith, Barbara Farr, director of Vermont Emergency Management, Dr. Cort Lohff, state epidemiologist at the Vermont Department of Health — and the many key leaders from around the state who are in the audience.

And our governor – Jim Douglas.

Your presence here today sends a clear message about the importance of preparing ourselves and our communities for a pandemic.

As Health Commissioner, I will be the first to say that this is not just about public health and health care.

And while we welcome national guidance on preparing for pandemic, we cannot wait on federal plans and strategies.

- Chances are the federal supply of vaccines and antivirals will not be available in sufficient quantity when we need them.
- Chances are we won't get federal assistance in the midst of a pandemic.

- Chances are our neighbors to the north, south, east and west will be in the same situation, unable to aid us.

For these reasons, we must plan carefully and thoroughly and responsibly and practically for *ourselves* ... so that our plans will work for Vermonters.

That is where you come in.

Today is all about preparing our nation by preparing our state and our communities.

The Vermont Department of Health has drafted and will continue to test and refine a *public health* response plan.

- We need to be ready to quickly detect the first cases of pandemic influenza.
- We need to do everything possible to limit the spread of disease and mitigate the harm.
- We need Vermonters in all walks of life to be fully informed and ready to take the actions required to protect themselves and help each other.

Slowing the spread of pandemic flu and caring for the many people who become sick will require strong measures that, as a society, we have not used since my grandparent's generation.

That's why we must plan carefully and openly, and have public discussion NOW about measures that may become necessary – such as vaccine rationing, isolation, quarantine, helping our neighbors in isolation or quarantine, school closings, bans on public gatherings, travel restrictions.

And that's why it's critical that we expand our preparedness *beyond* public health and health care. We need to have everyone – all of us – prepared to keep civil society functioning and our infrastructure up and running.

We have to prepare for the worst, hope for the best, and learn lessons from the past.

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There have been 3 pandemics in the last century – only one, the 1918-1919 pandemic - was severe, killing more Americans than all the wars of the 20th century.

But all you need to do is pick up a paper and read about the rapid spread of a new strain of avian influenza, H5N1, to understand why public health experts and government leaders are so very concerned.

If this strain of bird flu mutates, as flu viruses commonly do, and begins to spread easily from person to person, it could cause a human pandemic – a global health crisis – a true emergency by any definition.

And as we consider this scenario over the course of the day, it's clear that this would be an emergency that affects not just our health but our infrastructure, our economy, our way of life, our daily lives.

Just consider:

- During a severe pandemic, an estimated 30 percent of the population would likely become infected.

In Vermont, that's just under 200,000 people. Well over half of these ill Vermonters could be cared for at home.

- For those of you in housing, hospitality and human services ... think about the 40,000 people who, because they live alone or in an unsuitable situation, would require care in a setting outside their home.
- For the health care sector, consider that 10% of Vermonters -- nearly 20,000 people -- would need to be hospitalized during the first few months when flu would sweep across the state.
- For businesses, state and local government -- what will you do when 50% of your workforce is out sick?
- What about fuel delivery, garbage pickup, food service, public safety and all the infrastructure that we rely on to keep our towns and communities functioning?
- And what about the moms and dads and others who must choose between going to work or caring for a loved one?

As you can see, preparing for pandemic flu will take the efforts of all of us.

As your Commissioner of Health, I think about this every single day.

And your Department of Health has a team of professionals who have been charged with staying focused on preparing for pandemic flu...and I can tell you they think about it at night as well as during the day.

Now that I have been the first today to paint a worst-case scenario, take heart...

- Two-thirds of us will not get the flu.

- Detecting, controlling and preventing the spread of disease is the daily work of public health.
- Hospitals and health care professionals have experience caring for those suffering from the flu and pneumonia.
- Vermonters have a tradition of pulling together when the going gets tough.
- And we are not starting at square one.

Preparations for a statewide emergency such as a pandemic have been underway for several years.

- In 2004, the Health Department conducted Operation Red Clover, testing the state's collective ability to quickly and effectively respond to an act of bioterrorism involving pneumonic plague.
- Last May, Vermont hosted a pandemic influenza planning meeting of our public health and emergency management colleagues from New York, New Hampshire and Quebec.
- In a June 2005 tabletop exercise, the Health Department tested its draft plan for responding to a widespread outbreak of pandemic influenza with more than 100 health and emergency leaders from around the state.
- In November, Vermont hospitals conducted a statewide pandemic exercise to test their capacity to care for a sudden surge of patients.
- In July of this year we will conduct a full-scale pandemic flu exercise that will involve many of YOU.

Again, we appreciate Secretary Leavitt's leadership in helping us bring together public and private sector leaders at the state and local level to get ready NOW.

It is important that the federal government continues to take the lead in vaccine development, antiviral testing and providing best practices to the states.

It is equally important that the federal government understand the capabilities of states and localities and supports them.

We, in turn, must take advantage of what is being done at the national level, continually modifying our plans as best practices are determined and shared with us by our federal partners such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Sec. Leavitt, the former governor of Utah, and Dr. AG WUN OH BEE, the former Commissioner of Health in Florida, and Dr. Runge, someone who has served as a physician in an ER, are fully aware of what states and localities are facing.

And I am confident that everyone in this room will come away today with a better understanding of what we can and need to do as a state to best protect our citizens and to minimize, to the extent possible, the devastating effects a pandemic can have here.

It is now my pleasure to introduce Gov. Jim Douglas.

Governor Douglas has recognized the importance of ALL-hazards preparedness and has provided strong and steady leadership, whether we are dealing with a flu vaccine shortage, flood, widespread power outages, 70,000 Phish fans descending upon the state – or playing himself in Operation Red Clover...

Governor Douglas...